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SUBJECT: HANOI ARCHBISHOP PAINTS MIXED PICTURE ON GVN-CATHOLIC
CHURCH RELATIONS

Ref: A) HANOI 495; B) HANOI 275; C) HANOI 312; D) HANOI 317

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Summary

1. (SBU) On June 13, Poloff met Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet to discuss GVN-Church relations. Unprompted, the Archbishop began by noting the GVN's arrests and trials of scores of political activists. He told Poloff it is hard to describe how his followers feel about this matter. On a positive note, he said Ha Giang Party officials had, after months of delay, granted the Church permission to establish a congregation in the province. However, the Archbishop said that the Vatican is still working on coming up with suitable candidates for the two vacant bishoprics in Thai Binh and Vinh dioceses and that a Holy See delegation likely will not visit Vietnam before year's end. While the GVN remains optimistic about establishing formal ties with the Holy See, a lot of work -- and trust building -- remains before this becomes a reality. End Summary.

The USG's Unique Role

2. (SBU) On June 13, Hanoi Archbishop Ngo Quang Kiet began his 30-minute meeting with Poloff by noting, without prompting, that the GVN's arrests and trials of scores of political activists over the last several months caught him by surprise, but have "justifiably attracted a lot of international attention." Before Vietnam joined the WTO, the situation was "quiet." However, things changed after APEC and WTO entry, and it is difficult to describe his followers' emotions about the current political environment, he said. When President Bush attended the ecumenical service last November at the Cua Bac Catholic Church, Kiet asked the President to be "aware" not only of the USG's unique role in promoting economic development, but in pushing for freedom and human rights as well. He said he wants the USG to continue to keep this in mind. Poloff responded that U.S. officials have made clear to the GVN our strong concerns about the crackdown on political dissent.

Positive Developments

3. (SBU) Kiet said that over the past six months, the situation in Ha Giang Province has moved in a "positive direction." For one, local Party authorities permitted church officials to visit the province on important occasions such as Easter. In addition, on June 12, he received an official letter from the Ha Giang provincial Committee on Religious Affairs granting the Church permission to establish a congregation in the province, the Archbishop relayed.

Local church officials will now begin building a church, but of course completing it will take some time.

¶4. (SBU) On the issue of the pieta in Ninh Binh Province (Ref A), Kiet said that he was happy to report that it had been "fully restored" and that a suitable place for it had been found. Provincial Party officials fired the commune officials who participated in the pieta's destruction and made these officials pay for its restoration, he relayed.

Recent Setbacks

¶5. (SBU) On a negative note, however, Kiet expressed frustration about the Committee on Religious Affairs' (CRA) rejection of the Vatican's candidates for the two vacant bishoprics in the Thai Binh and Vinh dioceses. He said that he and his followers were surprised when the CRA did this because, "even when relations between the GVN and Vatican were tense, bishops were not rejected." Moreover, Catholic leaders and laymen do not understand the CRA's reasons -- the supposed criminal records of some members of the candidates' extended families -- for rejecting them, he lamented. (Note: During a separate June 14 meeting with Poloff, CRA officials merely said this issue is an "internal matter" (septel). End Note.) The Holy See is still working on finding suitable replacement candidates for these positions, the Archbishop relayed.

¶6. (SBU) Kiet said it was "more than coincidence" that these rejections occurred around the time of Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's historic visit to the Vatican (Ref B). Relations between the GVN and Holy See seemed to be getting better, and then the CRA rejected the bishops. The Archbishop alluded to "different tendencies" among GVN senior leaders in terms of the political crackdown and, more generally, government relations with religious groups. He did not elaborate further. Kiet said that the Holy See sent a delegation to Hanoi one month after PM Dung visited the Vatican, but that it is unlikely that another one will come to Hanoi

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before year's end.

¶7. (SBU) Sounding another negative note, Kiet relayed that when a Hanoi-based priest who had registered with local authorities arrived to administer Easter services in the Son La Parish, local authorities summoned him to their office. These authorities did not let the priest preside over Easter mass, Kiet said. The Archbishop told Poloff that he knows of no other instances in the last six months of local authorities preventing priests from tending to their flocks.

Comment

¶8. (SBU) The GVN continues to express optimism about establishing formal relations with the Holy See. However, continued delays in finding suitable candidates for the vacant bishoprics in the Thai Binh and Vinh dioceses and Archbishop Kiet's assertion that the Vatican is unlikely to send another delegation to Vietnam before 2008 clearly indicate that formal ties between the two sides remain a long way off. End Comment.

MARINE